

Conservation as Politics: Wildlife Conservation and Resource Management in India¹

Vasant K. Saberwal²

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India; protected areas.

1. Introduction

Wildlife conservation in India, as in most parts of the world, is complex and often contentious. What on the surface appears to be a simple issue of protecting wild animals and plants from forces beyond their control, on closer inspection quickly dissolves into a complex tangle of conflicting issues: human rights versus the protection of animals and forests, the exclusion of all humans from protected areas versus the possibility of human coexistence with wildlife and the exclusive state control over protected areas versus increased local participation in protected area management. Indeed, beyond the broad objective of preserving nature, there is often little in common among the various positions adopted by conservationists as to the specifics of what is to be protected, for, by and from whom.

Conservation practice necessarily entails the imposition of regulations over access to certain resources with specific people or institutions attempting to define who has access to those resources and on what terms. The outcome of negotiated access to resources is largely a reflection of power relations at the local, regional or national level. There are critical questions revolving around our understanding of how ecosystems work and the need to employ accurate science in the management of protected areas, but here too the links between power and knowledge influence our perception of the natural world and the optimal means of managing it. Conservation practice is, therefore, a profoundly political process. I will make a simple point in this essay: what gets conserved, and by whom, will ultimately be determined by social and political processes as much, if not more, than by the scientific knowledge we bring to bear on resource management.

1 This paper is a marginally modified version of a paper that appeared in 466 SEMINAR, 12-16 (June 1998). At the time, the author was a Research Associate at the Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore. My thanks to the editors at *Seminar* for permission to reprint this piece.

2 Independent Writer and Filmmaker, based in New Delhi.

2. State vs. Local Controls

The central stand-off in Indian conservation is the question of whether protected areas should be inviolate and managed by the state, or whether local communities should have a bigger say in the management of protected areas including, if need be, access to resources within these areas. Within this discussion, neither the deionisation of the state nor the romanticisation of local communities is of much value.

Can the state enforce unpopular policies that exclude local communities from conservation areas? The simple answer is no, not on a sustained basis. While the posting of guards may ensure the absence of villagers from the more high profile sections of National Parks, there is little the state can do against anonymous "crimes," such as the setting of forest fires or the use of poison to kill lions, tigers, and other carnivores. Such actions are, in part, an expression of the alienation villager's feel from conservation programs that deny them access to basic necessities. In turn, such animosity may translate into heightened support for poaching, an activity that is most effective by poachers local contacts, but also most effectively checked by cooperation with local contacts. Whether the state or the poacher captures the support of the local communities largely depends on the latter's degree of alienation from the resource and the state.

The divided nature of the state is another reason for its ineffectiveness in controlling local access to resources. Rarely do the agendas of the lowest functionaries of the state align with those of policy makers — if only because of the inability of the state to provide adequate salaries to its lowest paid staff. In the absence of adequate compensation, even if that compensation were to be raised, there is little reason to assume an alignment of forest guard and policy maker interests regarding what needs to be conserved and the means of conserving the same. Guards hired from local villages are far more likely to have sympathies with the people among whom they have kin or other long-standing ties. Guards may of course choose to enforce restrictions on some members of the community. However, this is as likely to be an exercise of power as an attempt to conserve, say the wild flowers of the Himalayas, and is a shaky premise for long-term efforts at conserving nature.

There are also horizontal divisions within the state, in part a manifestation of conflicting mandates to different departments. However, let us leave that for the moment, and concentrate on what is the more crucial issue of potential differences in the agendas of politicians and bureaucrats. However imperfectly Indian democracy may appear to function, politicians will eventually respond to voter demands for the lifting of restrictions on access to forest resources, it is simply a question of the issue coming to gain sufficient importance in a given constituency. Politicians elected on an anti-conservation platform will, ultimately strip protected areas of this status, as has happened in parts of Gujarat. Political intervention in Forest Department functioning is amply documented by Valmik Thapar for the state of Madhya

Pradesh in Central India.³ Variations to the theme have been reported within the context of local access to Reserve Forests in Himachal Pradesh.⁴ Such interference arises for two reasons: politicians benefit personally by allowing industrialists preferential access to the mineral and forest wealth within these areas, and they benefit politically from fulfilling electoral promises. As a result, the use of forests and grasslands is determined more by local community leaders and politicians and less by the Forest Department, the agency mandated to manage this resource. Thus, there is a *political* problem associated with exclusionist conservation policies of the Indian Forest Department. A long-term effective implementation of such policy borders on the impossible.

In response to what has been perceived to be a fundamentally unjust policy, numerous environmental and social activists have argued for the need to provide local communities with a greater role in protected area management. This is viewed as being both inherently more equitable than an exclusionary policy and a more effective means of conserving natural resources.

An extreme position among many social activists is for the handing over of all protected areas to the sole care of local communities. However, there are other, less drastic, measures suggested by many both within and outside the country. Following the successes of Joint Forest Management there have been proposals for Joint Protected Area Management, wherein local communities would be given greater managerial and decision making responsibility than is currently the case. There is an international interest in eco-development, which is seen as encouraging eco-friendly development within villages with the aim of improving the financial status of villagers, thereby reducing their dependence on resources within protected areas.

There are also examples from many parts of the country of local action enabling the Forest Department to achieve its own conservation goals. The Tarun Bharat Sangh, for example, has successfully agitated for a ban on mining activities on land adjoining Sariska National Park, in Rajasthan. Similarly, inhabitants of villages that adjoin the Kailadevi Sanctuary, also in Rajasthan, have successfully come together to prevent migratory pastoralists from moving through the sanctuary, owing to the fear that the annual migrations of lakhs of sheep and goats are responsible for the absence of forest regeneration. In each instance, there is a convergence of local and state interests, with the latter's interests being served by the (political) mobilization of the villagers.

This second example also points to a problem with the whole approach of increasing local participation; a problem of defining the local community. We have a coincidence of interests of the Forest Department and local villagers in the desire to reduce pastoralist presence in the area. Pastoralists, however, would argue that they too are part of the "local," and that their rights to use the area are at least as

3 V. THAPAR, *FATAL LINKS* 60 (1998).

4 V.K. SABERWAL, *SHEPHERDS, BUREAUCRATS & CONSERVATION IN THE WESTERN HIMALAYA* 75 (1999).

“traditional” as those of the villagers. Riven as Indian communities are by caste, class and other divisions, and given that in a specific context there are numerous stakeholders, how does one identify the limits of the “local community” that will control access to resources? While the call to hand over control to local communities has a moral authority that is incontestable, even those who believe in it have to deconstruct the category of the community. This is vital if conservation is to be rooted at the local level.⁵

Many commentators have romanticized local communities, particularly with regard to the ecological harmony of their lifestyles and the egalitarian and equitable functioning of their institutions. Research has demonstrated, however, that local power structures are often at least equally, if not more, responsible than the state for creating conditions of dependency and poverty. A simple shifting of control from the state to the local level may ultimately do little more than reinforce unequal relations of power at the local level. The means of empowering local communities needs to be carefully thought out, including a conceptualization of the possible role the state can play in effecting and sustaining such change.

The basic fact remains: we need to better involve village communities in conservation programmes not because of lifestyles that “are in harmony with nature” nor owing to the “egalitarian local institutions” that will ensure equitable access to resources but, rather, because if we continue to alienate local communities, we will, per force, be helping to politicise conservation issues, resulting in a side-lining of foresters and others with an interest in conservation. Instead, conservationists could use electoral power to apply political pressure to force the eviction of extractive industries, such as mining and forestry, from areas of conservation interest. Such political mobilization, in the interests of conservation rather than against it, is likely to take place only where local communities are part of — and not excluded from — conservation policy and practice.

3. Keeping People Out, Letting them In

Involving villages in conservation programmes is, of course, rather vague. Let us assume that our purpose is to generate support for conservation initiatives, or at least minimize villager hostility to conservation measures. To focus on the latter: a key source of animosity towards conservation programs initiated by Forest Departments is the attempt to exclude people from National Parks, Tiger Reserves and the like. The question that is raised is whether a blanket ban on human use of resources within National Parks is necessary. If the answer is a conditional no, then one has a potential means of enhancing local support for conservation. Let us examine the scientific debate over the exclusion of people from conservation areas in some detail.

5 M. Rangarajan, *The politics of ecology: The debate on wildlife and people in India, 1970-1995*, 31 *ECON. & POL. WKLY.* 2391-2406 (1996).

Various justifications have been advanced over time to keep people out of areas of conservation interest. The notion that subsistence hunting pressures would lead to a decline in wildlife populations was used in much of the colonized world, even as sport hunting, often on a massive scale, was both permitted and extolled.⁶ Over the past two centuries, however, a second, more powerful idea has supported this exclusion of people from Protected Areas: the notion of a delicate balance in nature. Within this construction of nature, arguably linked to Christian mythology,⁷ nature is seen as being comprised of individual components linked through various chains in a vast food web. Each delicate and easily disturbed link helps to maintain an overall balance in nature. Human activities within such a framework such as fire, grazing, and shifting cultivation have been seen as "un-natural" and necessarily a disturbance and threat to the delicate web of life.

Indeed, the notion of nature as a delicate web has constituted a key underpinning to theoretical ecology until as recently as the 1980's and continues to inform popular perceptions of the natural world. For society at large, this is often the most powerful rationale for the continuation of a policy to keep people out of protected areas.

However, more recent research has suggested a more chaotic and less deterministic functioning of nature. Human disturbances in such situations are simply seen as being a part of the system. Fire regimes have been shown to play a significant role in shaping the structure and composition of savannah, prairie, and forest communities. East African pastoralists, for example, regularly burn dead vegetation in order to encourage the growth of fresh shoots and to prevent the conversion of savannah to scrub bush.⁸ Serengeti National Park is a part of this savannah and the periodic pastoralist burning it is subject to needs to be seen as an integral part of the system that sustains the greatest assemblage of wild mammals in the world. There are other examples of fire playing critical roles in shaping forest and grassland communities.⁹

The response of systems to fire is primarily dependent on the evolutionary history of the species that comprise the system. Thus, given a long history of being subject to a particular burning regime, an ecosystem may be comprised of fire-tolerant or fire-dependent species. In such cases, the removal of fire may lead to an invasion of exotics that are competitively superior in a decreased fire environment. Conversely, the introduction of fire to a system unused to being burned may result in the invasion of exotics capable of withstanding the stress of fire. It is clear that an alteration to a fire regime is likely to alter system characteristics. How one evaluates such change is a function of one's management objectives.

6 J.M. MacKENZIE, *THE EMPIRE OF NATURE: HUNTING, CONSERVATION & BRITISH IMPERIALISM* 298 (1988).

7 D. WORSTER, *NATURE'S ECONOMY: A HISTORY OF ECOLOGICAL IDEAS* 34 (2nd Ed. 1985).

8 K. HOMEWOOD & A. W. ROGERS, *MAASAILAND ECOLOGY: PASTORALIST DEVELOPMENT & WILDLIFE CONSERVATION IN NGORONGORO, TANZANIA* 10 (1991).

9 N. LANGSTON, *FOREST DREAMS, FOREST NIGHTMARES: THE PARADOX OF OLD GROWTH IN THE INLAND WEST* 29 (1995); H. E. Howe, *Managing species diversity in Tallgrass prairie: Assumptions and implications*, 8 *CONSERVATION BIO.* 694-96 (1994).

Similarly, intense grazing pressure may be responsible for maintaining high levels of species diversity within grasslands. Research on areas that have historically been subject to such grazing pressure — areas such as the East African savannah, the North American prairie, and the species-rich chalk grasslands of England and Northern Europe¹⁰ — supports this theory. In the absence of grazing, taller species may outgrow shorter species, thereby “shading” the latter out. In effect, grazing may reduce the height advantage a dominant species may hold, thereby reducing the dominance of a few species and increasing overall species diversity. Amidst considerable controversy over exclusion of livestock grazing from Keoladeo National Park and the Valley of Flowers National Park, recent research indicates an increase in weeds with potentially serious consequences for key conservation values of these areas, particularly avian and plant diversity.¹¹ The absence of research precludes a detailed evaluation of other Indian experiences of the consequences of altering long-standing grazing regimes.

Research suggests that grassland species that have evolved under an intense grazing regime have developed physiological adaptations that enable a high tolerance to grazing losses. On the other hand, in regions with a shorter history to grazing pressures, intense grazing can devastate a flora, leading to the invasion of unpalatable grasses and woody species as has been demonstrated in the Galapagos Islands and the inter-mountain American West.¹² Whether grazing constitutes a disruption to a system, or, as a disturbance is an integral part of the system, depends very much on the history of the region's grazing regime.

Theoretical treatments of fluctuations in biodiversity indicate low levels of biodiversity at both the high and the low extremes of the disturbance spectrum and high levels of species diversity at moderate levels of disturbance.¹³ Climatic disturbances such as fire, drought, flooding, hurricanes, etc., have all been seen as increasing the general heterogeneity within an ecosystem, thereby leading to both a greater diversity of habitat types and consequently a greater faunal diversity. The same heterogeneity of habitat types can result from human use of a system, including heavy grazing, burning, indigenous farming systems and the like. It goes without saying that the disturbance hypothesis cannot be used to suggest that any and all human activity can be encouraged within a Protected Area. The idea, however, that *all*

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- 10 S.J. McNaughton, *Serengeti grassland ecology: The role of composite environmental factors and contingency in community organization*, 53(3) ECO. MONOGRAPHS 307 (1993); R. J. Hobbs & L. F. Huenneke, *Disturbance, diversity and invasion: implications for conservation*, 6 CONSERVATION BIO. 324, 328 (1992). Howe, *supra* note 9, at 696-98.
 - 11 B. Gopal, *Wetland (mis) management by keeping people out: two examples from India*, 20 LANDSCAPE & URBAN PLANNING 53, 56 (1991); H.B. Naithani, et al., *Valley of Flowers: Need for conservation or preservation*, 117 INDIAN FORESTER 371, 373 (1992).
 - 12 Hobbes & Huenneke, *supra* note 10, at 328.
 - 13 J.H. Connell, *Diversity in tropical rain forests and coral reefs*, 199 SCI. 1302, 1303-04 (1978); P. S. Petraitis, R. E. Latham & R. A. Niesenbaum, *The maintenance of biological diversity by disturbance*, 64 Q. REV. BIO. 393, 394 (1989).

human resource utilization within protected areas is inimical to the conservation of biological diversity is hard to sustain in the face of such an argument. From a purely ecological standpoint, there may be value in allowing a continuation of certain local land use practices.¹⁴

Such a position, of course, assumes that some level of regulation will take place to ensure that resource use remains in concert with the achievement of conservation objectives. In turn, this implies management based on monitoring, and requires judgement regarding what constitutes acceptable levels of resource harvesting. Once again, we arrive at a political crossroads in conservation. Whose judgement is to be used with regard to what constitutes land degradation? Both sides claim superior expertise in this context. First, as articulated by officials of the Forest Department and by research scientists, who claim knowledge premised on the "scientific," and hence superior, training, of their experts. They contend that the knowledge of herders, cultivators, and forest users, is too unsophisticated to be of use in forest management. In counterpoint, one also hears claims, some rather shrill, to the superiority of "indigenous knowledge" over "western science." These claimants contend that their knowledge is more valuable since it is gained from a lived experience rather through the "unreal" world of experimentation.

This may be a caricature of the polarized nature of positions adopted by different groups of people, but only marginally so. There is often an explicit dismissal of local knowledge as being unscientific, as also a romanticisation of local knowledge, as somehow having all the answers. It is the political issue par excellence, for the claim to knowledge is also the claim to power. As with most issues related to conservation, the truth lies somewhere in between these positions.. Science has tremendous power to acquire knowledge of how systems function through the use of statistics and the appropriate design of experiments.. However, it is very difficult to establish causality with regard to ecological phenomenon given environmental variability from one year to the next and the covariation one is routinely confronted with in nature. In contrast, years, and in some contexts, generations of experience, may have clues regarding "normal" and "deviant" ecosystem behaviour. The question is whether we can develop the sophistication to mix deductive and inductive reasoning, or are we too fixed in our ways to be willing to look at complex problems using any and all sources of information?

14 A key response to this position is that most such examples are from areas with low population densities, and that the same logic would not hold within the context of India's population pressures. I would argue the need examine the issue on a site-specific basis (there is a need to deconstruct the Indian "population problem"). Certainly, many parts of the alpine meadows of the Himalayas are not necessarily subject to increasing livestock pressures (Saberwal 1999, p. 171-176). The same may be true of other parts of India with difficult terrain - including the Thar Desert and the northeast Himalayas. In any case, a blanket ban on human resource use may not be necessary, and we need to explore the conditions under which human resource use is compatible with achieving conservation goals.

4. Conclusion

There are no easy solutions. However, this is to be expected, given that one is dealing with emotionally and politically charged issues. Yet, as we individually or collectively claim the high moral ground in speaking on behalf of those unable to express themselves (plants, animals, or "helpless" local communities), there is a need to recognize our tendency to work with dualities that are necessarily simplifications of inherently complex phenomenon. Should people be out or in? Should the state or should local people manage protected areas? Should "Western science" or "indigenous knowledge" provide the basis for resource management?

For the most part, these are political questions, but then conservation *is* about politics. To effect better conservation we need to function as part of the wider political process — not solely as social scientists and scientists who have the "best" answers. In a situation in which people's livelihoods and security are at stake, there are no solutions that will satisfy everyone. However, can we prevent the politicisation of conservation? Can we prevent the backlash from exclusionary conservation that results in politicians making decisions that affect the future of national parks rather than the managers, scientists and local communities, that currently stake claims to this management?

Perhaps the unwillingness of conservationists of different hues to give ground to those from other camps hides the larger truth of the extreme difficulties involved in creating working coalitions. But, as with the larger national political scene, and perhaps linked to the growing number of political forums for disadvantaged communities, I suspect that the era of a single constituency controlling all that happens within India's Protected Areas is drawing to an end. We can try to bring local communities on board, along with all the complexity that entails, or, we can stand by and watch as protected areas are encroached upon by industry, cultivation, herds of animals, and the construction of dams. Much of this will happen with the support of, or in response to, the demands of local communities alienated by an environmental movement rooted in what is ultimately an urban preoccupation with a specific, culturally defined vision of nature.